

B

BREVITY

Brevity when overdone defeats the primary purposes of communication: truthfulness and comprehensibility. Witness the misleading newspaper headline or the penny-wise and enigmatic telegram. Nonetheless, brevity like economy has considerable merits. To be brief, as well as clear does not reduce what you have to say — it gives you the chance to say more in the same space. Your readers want substance for the time they give you. In short, jewels. Multum in parvo at first attracts and then satisfies. So some devices for saying briefly but exactly what you mean may deserve attention.

Avoid long words whenever short words will serve us well or better. The word end saves 8 letters over the word termination. Has has a like advantage over possesses. Anticipate means to take action in expectation of something: expect therefore saves 4 letters and says what most people think they mean when they magniloquently write anticipate.

Write short sentences whenever you can. If you arrange your thoughts to follow each other logically then your sentences, though short, will hang together clearly.

Though the poet, the essayist, or the novelist achieves his desired effect by using words having just the connotations he wishes, the scientist uses words that denote precisely what he means. So, among other things, look out for any part of the verb to be. To be has six different connotations. That should put you on guard. Don't write "the over-all nature of the movement of vehicles in the city of Detroit was found to be a source of annoyance to the police." Put a transitive verb in place of that word was and you will find yourself using 6 words, "traffic in Detroit annoyed the police," thus saving 18 words with which to express some additional fact or idea. I have found that merely getting rid of any form of the verb to be in favor of a transitive verb usually saves about 16% of wordage.

Since the verb to be appears in the passive voice of all verbs, e.g., "it was observed that," I venture to say that the excessive impersonality of authors who use the passive continuously succeeds merely in forcing their readers' attention to dis a lingering death. Suppose A.B.C. and X.Y.Z. write a paper together. Why the agonized modesty of, "It was observed by one of us (X.Y.Z.) that . . ." when "X.Y.Z. noted that . . ." says the same thing in one-third of the space? Often the sentences beginning with it and followed by the passive verb, e.g., "It

was felt that" or "It was recognized that," omit any mention of who did the feeling or the recognizing and thereby add an irritatingly irresponsible vagueness to stuff-shirted verbiage.

Don't make the neurotic assumption that since you can't write easily and well, other people must just have a knack. Nor divorce Sweat to marry Envy. Professional writers find wiring hard too, but they have no airy excuses such as "after all I'm not a writer — I'm a research man": I would suppose the erasers of their pencils nearly always wear out long before the leads. Indeed, most success in writing a clear, truthful, and concise account of anything depends more on your ability to rewrite, condense, and tenaciously edit your own stuff — from the first through the fourth draft — than on what appears in first writing. A first draft that takes an hour to write may well take 4 to 12 hours of revision — preferably at well-spaced intervals.

Nouns and verbs always provide the core of language: choose them carefully. Every time you use nouns in the plural, e.g., "solutions," ask yourself, "Do I mean all solutions? Or many? Or few? Or, as a matter of fact, just exactly how many?" Beware of abstract and collective nouns. They frequently mean different things to different readers: they denote no one thing because they have too many connotations. They harbor vagueness. They encourage evasiveness. They shelter irresponsibility. You can make effective use of one of the following adverbs before the verbs in scientific papers: always, often, sometimes, or never. Such practice will sometimes improve your logic and reasoning, even before you reach the final draft.

To achieve real excellence you will revise at least once and exclusively to eliminate uselessly reptitious words and phrases, or even sentences. "The vain repetitions that the heathern use" may occur near or far from the one necessary word or phrase. This common fault often shows itself only if you will read aloud once or twice. Useless repetitions occur almost inevitably unless you make a preliminary outline of the right sequence in which to present your statements even before starting the first draft.

Above all, else remember that easy writing usually makes damned hard reading.

---

P.S. The above contains 800 words more or less. Six hours of work—about one hour of thinking over, putting down and arranging rough notes, an hour for the first draft, and 4 hours at rewriting and revision; rather easy writing

and therefore I feel rather hard reading. By no means complete: only some suggestions that work well if put to work. And the verb to be used verbally only once -- viz., "To be brief..."

Alan Gregg, M.D.